

PERESTROIKA PIROUETTES AND GLASNOST GLISSÉS: THE KIROV AND THE  
BOLSHOI BALLET, 1977-1991

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## ABSTRACT

JENNIFER L. BUXTON: *Perestroika Pirouettes and Glasnost Glissés:  
The Kirov and the Bolshoi Ballet, 1977-1991*  
(Under direction of Jacqueline M. Olich)

This paper examines the developments of the Soviet art form of classical ballet during the twilight years of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet era, art and politics were closely intertwined; the country's ballet institutions served the government abroad, as cultural ambassadors, and at home, as educational representatives. As Gorbachev's political and economic reforms progressed, state funded institutions sought to adapt to the ever-changing environment. Through an investigation of the activities of the two preeminent ballet theaters in the country, the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow and the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, this project explores how two cultural institutions navigated the dynamic landscape of perestroika and challenges the trope of Brezhnevite stagnation. Through the utilization of memoirs, periodicals, and secondary sources, my study illustrates how ballet artists in Moscow and Leningrad responded to the changes occurring outside of the theater during this time and complicates our perception of the otherwise improvisational nature of the Soviet Union's last years.

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## Introduction

On the night of January 17, 2013, a masked assailant attacked Sergei Filin, the artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet, by throwing sulfuric acid in the ballet master's face.<sup>1</sup> The horrific attack, which occurred outside of Filin's home in Moscow, attracted international attention and sparked shock and disbelief among many dancers and balletomanes.<sup>2</sup> While creative disagreements, personal tensions, and artistic rivalries in ballet are universal, much of the world is left wondering what could have prompted someone to viciously bring the inner battles of the theater onto the streets of Moscow. Many, including the Bolshoi's general director Anatolii Iksanov, believe that Filin was targeted because of his artistic goals and plans for the Bolshoi, which encompassed hiring, for the first time in its history, an American as a principal dancer<sup>3</sup> and acquiring new choreographic works for the company.<sup>4</sup> Others, including former Bolshoi chief choreographer Aleksei Ratmanskii, were less than surprised

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<sup>1</sup> For Russian translations I employ the Library of Congress transliteration system except for well-known proper names, i.e., Maya Plisetskaya instead of Maiia Plisetskaia and for Russian names frequently used in English, i.e., Bolshoi Theater instead of Bol'shoi Theater.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Barry, "Harsh Light Falls on Bolshoi After Acid Attack," *New York Times*, January 18, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> In September 2011, Filin offered David Hallberg, of American Ballet Theater, a permanent position at the Bolshoi as a principal dancer, the top rank in a ballet company. Hallberg made his Bolshoi debut in November of the same year and continues to honor his obligations to both companies. Alastair Macaulay and Daniel Wakin, "American is to Join the Bolshoi Ballet," *New York Times*, September 20, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Bolshoi was set to premiere a new version of *The Rite of Spring*, by British choreographer Wayne McGregor, but the March 2013 performance was postponed due to Filin's health. Olga Svistunova, "Bol'shoi teatr perenes prem'eru balet "Vesna sviashchennaia" do pol'nogo vyzdorovleniia Filina," *Itar-Tass*, February 1, 2013.

by the assault and he expressed an overall disgust with the toxic Bolshoi environment.<sup>5</sup> The attack on Filin illustrates the extent to which ballet in Russia, especially in the capital's preeminent theater,<sup>6</sup> is still in a period of transition, even though more than twenty years have elapsed since the demise of the Soviet system.

The artistic questions and conflicts at the Bolshoi today can be traced back to the late Soviet era, when Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to the position of general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 ushered in the era of *perestroika*, *glasnost*, and *demokratizatsiia*. Gorbachev's perestroika, often translated as "economic restructuring," aimed to liberate the Soviet economy from the state, which had previously regulated and directed almost all trade activity and industrial production in the country and, in addition, sought to support the development of small-scale private enterprise.<sup>7</sup> Glasnost, or "openness," allowed for a new level of truthfulness and honesty in the public arena, which promoted a formerly unthinkable free dialogue between the state and citizen.<sup>8</sup> Initially, Gorbachev viewed *demokratizatsiia*, or democratization, not as a full-blown Western style democracy,<sup>9</sup> but favored measures that demanded the Party be more accountable to the public. *Demokratizatsiia* brought electoral

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Gordeeva, "Ne streliaite v belykh lebedei. O napadenii na baletnogo khydryka, vynuzhdennoi bezhat' iz strany balerine i zhestkoi real'nosti vozdušnogo isskusstva," *Moskovskie Novosti*, January 24, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> While the use of "Kirov Theater" and "Bolshoi Theater" generally indicates both the opera and ballet companies that worked in each institution, from this point on when I use these terms I am referring only to the respective ballet companies.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse? Understanding Historical Change* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 115-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 134.



reform, the implementation of secret ballot voting in elections, and established a new parliament to replace the Supreme Soviet.<sup>10</sup> Gorbachev understood that the Soviet economic, political, and cultural system desperately needed revitalization and reform. In hindsight, it may appear that these measures were premeditated, however, when Gorbachev first assumed power he lacked a concrete vision for how these changes should be implemented and how far they should extend.

The change in policy from above also offered hope for the realization of the long-forgotten dreams of the members of the intelligentsia and cultural elite in Gorbachev's age cohort.<sup>11</sup> The longing for a more open society with the possibility of dissent had been halted by the political crackdown that had ended the relatively liberal period of the Nikita Khrushchev Era thaw almost twenty years earlier. Where previously only the idea of a "single truth" could exist, the state now tolerated "socialist pluralism," which allowed for open debate within the socialist structure.<sup>12</sup> Gorbachev enlisted the intelligentsia to perpetuate ideas for reform to the Soviet people and to the world.<sup>13</sup> Political scientist Archie Brown argues that although the ideas and longings of public dissidents and the private wishes of those who had remained outwardly loyal to the system provided motivations for the reforms following 1985, Gorbachev's position at the helm of the Communist Party was the critical factor in promulgating the impetus for change.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union*, 108- 9.

<sup>11</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 341

<sup>12</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union*, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 343.

<sup>14</sup> Archie Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

Gorbachev began his tenure as General Secretary with the hopes of revitalizing a broken and corrupt system, but by the end of the 1980s he struggled to maintain control of the country. Some strongly disapproved of the new liberalizing policies, while others complained that reforms and change could not come fast enough. At the time, the ensuing environment appeared dynamic and unpredictable.<sup>15</sup> State-sponsored opera and ballet theaters, institutionalized in the capital of every republic and in major cities, were not immune from the upheaval and chaos occurring all around. The changed political environment forced the ballet theaters to grapple with questions and problems that had previously been swept under the stage curtain. With the threat of economic instability looming and many of the nation's most talented dancers flocking to the West, how did the country's two preeminent ballet companies, the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow and the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, navigate the treacherous landscape of perestroika? To what extent did the companies embrace their newfound ability to collaborate with the West? Or, rather than engaging globally, would the ballet theaters attempt to continue along the relatively conservative path they had followed throughout much of the Soviet period?

I argue that, while considerable innovation occurred regarding the international activity of the ballet companies and dancers at both the Bolshoi and the Kirov Theaters during perestroika, the desire by some of the nation's leading ballet artists for creative change and innovation not in line with the government's prescribed ideal of a "Sovietized" ballet existed before the political watershed of 1985. At the Kirov Theater the testing of artistic boundaries began in the late 1970s at the behest of the company's leadership. At the Bolshoi Theater, artistic transformation was pursued by some of the company's star dancers

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13.

more than a decade before Gorbachev. The Bolshoi performers, however, faced strong resistance from established authority in their quest for choreographic modernization and artistic change, resulting in inner conflicts that have yet to be resolved and placing the Bolshoi in a constant flux of prolonged transition that has outlived the reigns of both the former Bolshoi leadership and the Soviet Union.

The actions of the artistic directors of each company, the Bolshoi's Yuri Grigorovich and the Kirov's Oleg Vinogradov, strongly influenced the cultural and artistic environment of their respective institutions. Grigorovich sought to suppress anyone who challenged his creative hegemony; especially the prima ballerina Maya Plisetskaya. Conversely, Vinogradov aimed to foster the development of young choreographers and actively invited Western choreographers to stage their works for Kirov dancers well before 1985. The actions of dancers who sympathized with Plisetskaya's longing for artistic growth, along with those who supported Vinogradov's desire for foreign contributions to the repertoire, illustrates that cultural ferment existed in both institutions well before the reforms of perestroika indicated that these artistic dreams could be fully realized.<sup>16</sup> Due to the influence of each theater's leader, however, artistic innovations in each company developed along distinct paths.<sup>17</sup>

I also contend that the locality of each theater contributed to the atmosphere of each company. Sociologist Louis Wirth has "argued that cities be viewed as discrete social organisms that are themselves both causes and effect of the political, economic, and cultural

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<sup>16</sup> The desire for change and innovation exhibited by some ballet artists was reflective of wider trend of cultural ferment.

<sup>17</sup> Although not completely without controversy, the Kirov, (today called the Mariinsky Ballet) has transitioned into the post Soviet period far more smoothly than the Bolshoi. The embracing of new and foreign choreography has not produced the vitriol seen at the Bolshoi and the Mariinsky has not experienced nearly as much public scandal. This, I argue may be attributable to the theater's location in St. Petersburg.

occurrences within their borders.”<sup>18</sup> In Moscow, the Bolshoi’s dancers and artistic staff frequently interacted with members of the government elite and enjoyed luxuries, including plush apartments, access to special consumer goods, and dachas, reserved exclusively for privileged members of Soviet society. While artists based in Moscow may have benefited from the Soviet capital’s material offerings, their close connection to the center of power limited the opportunities for foreign collaboration and artistic growth at home. In Leningrad, performers with the Kirov Ballet fell under the central leadership’s general distrust of cultural and artistic life in the second city.<sup>19</sup> Dance scholar Christina Erzahi notes, however, that distance from the capital also allowed the Kirov to flourish artistically in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>20</sup> In the realm of ballet the city continued to live up to the goals established at its founding as “both port and portal, the space through which western material and intellectual goods and ideas would flow into Russia.”<sup>21</sup> Once under the leadership of Vinogradov in the late 1970s, distance from the center helped account for foreign influence in the ballet theater in Leningrad.

The uncertain economic situation also deterred artistic growth. The restructuring of the Soviet economy did not result in the rejuvenation of the Soviet system originally hoped for by Gorbachev, but instead yielded shortages of food and basic consumer goods and produced steep inflation. The state’s loss of tax revenue from new laws limiting alcohol sales

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<sup>18</sup> Louise McReynolds, “Urbanism as a Way of Russian Life,” *Journal of Urban History* 20, no. 2 (1994): 240, <http://juh.sagepub.com/content/20/2/240.citation>.

<sup>19</sup> Christina Erzahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 79.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Louise McReynolds, “St. Petersburg: The National Destiny in the Cityscape,” *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 (2007): 857, <http://juh.sagepub.com/content/33/5/857>.

and the declining world price of oil, a major Soviet export, further exacerbated these economic problems.<sup>22</sup> The state, the main benefactor of both the Bolshoi and the Kirov, experienced difficulties during the Gorbachev era, which despite the strong desire of some ballet artists for new repertoire, impeded, with a few exceptions, the realization of innovative pieces and opportunities to collaborate with Western choreographers at home during this transition stage.

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<sup>22</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union*, 136.

## Researching Russian Ballet: Historiographic and Methodological Overview

A considerable number of scholarly works have attempted to explain the end of the Soviet Union, to elucidate how the Soviet system created a Gorbachev, and to offer analysis of the economy, society, and politics of the period.<sup>23</sup> Relatively few studies, however, address the arts and artistic life during this time. Some notable exceptions include historian Anna Lawton's *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time*, the first study dedicated to the cinema of the late 70s and 80s. She examines film as a cultural object shaped by the politics of the time and the realities of the industry and market. Journalist Andrew Solomon investigates visual artists and their creations during perestroika in his book *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost*. Historian Alec Nove's *Glasnost in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Russia* provides an overview of the literary landscape through 1989 and discusses how the political scene relates to the performing arts and other areas of high culture.<sup>24</sup> Although they do not focus exclusively on the perestroika timeframe, three works

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<sup>23</sup> For further reading on explaining the end of the Soviet Union, see: Steven Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994); on the economy, politics, and society, see: Anders Aslund, *Gorbachev's Struggle for Economic Reform* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jerry Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the U.S.S.R., 1985-1991* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997); Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Andrew Solomon, *The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Alec Nove, *Glasnost in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Russia* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

published in Russian include sections that discuss ballet during the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Material devoted to the performing arts during the last decade of the Soviet Union, however, remains scarce.

Considering ballet's prominent position in Imperial Russia, its role in legitimizing Soviet culture, and the international headlines and popularity it garnered both inside and outside the Soviet Union, it is surprising that scholarship on this topic remains relatively limited.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, however, scholars have begun to address this dearth. Dance historian Lynn Garafola's *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* details the inner workings of the company's famed Paris seasons at the beginning of the twentieth century. Scholar Tim Scholl examines the lasting traditions and global reach of Russian and Soviet ballet in *From Petipa to Balanchine* and *The Sleeping Beauty: A Legend in Progress*. Christina Ezrahi's *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* investigates the interaction of politics and ballet in the 1950s and 1960s. Ezrahi's recently published monograph is the first scholarly study to analyze the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet utilizing archival sources. The most prominent Russian ballet historians, the late Vera Krasovskaya and Elizabeth Souritz have also crafted valuable studies. Although some translations of these investigations exist, the majority of their work is available only in Russian.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Iuliia Iakovleva, *Mariinskii teatr: Balet XX vek* (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005); V.M. Gaevskii and P. Gershenzon, *Razgovory o russkom balete. Kommentarii k noveishei istorii* (Moskva: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2010); T. Kuznetsova, *Khroniki Bol'shogo baleta* (Moskva: Natalis, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Possible explanations for the lack of scholarly investigation could be attributed to an absence of Russian language ability among classical ballet experts, and conversely, a general unfamiliarity with ballet terminology and ballet aesthetics among those studying Russian and Soviet history.

<sup>27</sup> Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998); Tim Scholl, *From Petipa to Balanchine: Classical Revival and the Modernization of Ballet* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Tim Scholl, *The Sleeping Beauty: A Legend in Progress* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

While all of these scholarly accounts contribute to the study of Russian and Soviet ballet, my study is the first to investigate the cultural phenomenon during the twilight years of the Soviet Union. “The 1970s and 1980s merit a separate study,” Ezrahi states, “as they were defined by somewhat different problems and opportunities arising before the backdrop of Brezhnevite stagnation and Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost.”<sup>28</sup> I relied primarily on memoirs by choreographers and dancers to understand the activities of the ballet theaters during the late Soviet period. Dance publications in the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain provided extensive coverage of how the political situation in the Soviet Union created opportunities for dancers on stages of both sides of the Iron Curtain, although in general these articles and interviews do not include substantive analysis on specific perestroika or glasnost related policies and focus chiefly on issues relevant to a dance audience.

Utilizing secondary sources, materials archived in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, and a private archive, my project illuminates the journey of the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballet during this previously unstudied but critical era. Although other ballet theaters in both cities staged performances, notably, the Maly Theater in Leningrad and the Moscow Classical Ballet in the capital, due to the greater international presence of the Bolshoi and the Kirov and the availability of sources, I limit my study to the foremost ballet institutions of each city.

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2004); Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Vera Krasovskaia, *Vaganova: A Dance Journey from Petersburg to Leningrad* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2005); Elizabeth Souritz, *Soviet Choreographers of the 1920s* trans. Lynn Vissaon, ed. Sally Banes (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 9.



An examination of the ebb and flow of the activities of the two major ballet theaters of the Soviet Union from the late 1970s to the early 1990s complicates our perception of the improvisational nature of the Soviet Union's last years and helps answer Archie Brown's call for further investigation in deciphering the existing preconditions necessary for reform of the Soviet system.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years after the end of the Soviet Union we know the final act of the ballet it danced; yet throughout the last ten years of the country's existence no one knew of the nation's impending curtain call. It is imperative, when studying the late Soviet period, to keep this in mind in order to prevent a deterministic analysis. By illustrating how some artists began to test the boundaries of what would be permissible in the public arena during this time, I add to existing scholarship by questioning the preconceived notion of Brezhnevite stagnation. In addition, my paper adds another layer of understanding to this still much-debated period of Soviet history and reveals that, though the Soviet Union may be gone, unresolved conflicts and issues stemming from the Soviet era, most recently exemplified by the attack on Filin, remain today.

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, *The Gorbachev Factor*, 12.

## **Background: Ballet in Imperial Russia and Ballet's New Role in the Soviet Union**

“It was a well known fact,” wrote one observer, “that the tsar’s treasury was the most generous in Europe for ballet.”<sup>30</sup> Since the mid-eighteenth century, Russian ballet was closely associated with the tsars and aristocracy. In 1738 the Empress Anna Ivanovna (1693-1740) established the Imperial Ballet School at her court. Under the generous patronage of the tsars, ballet in Imperial Russia prospered and flourished, eventually becoming the epicenter of the ballet world by the late nineteenth century. The tsar not only financed the expenses associated with the Imperial Theatre including lavish costumes, extravagant sets, a full orchestra, and dancers’ and choreographers’ salaries, but also financed the Imperial Ballet School. Talented foreign teachers, dancers, and choreographers flocked to Russia because of the support ballet received from the tsars and the decline in ballet experienced in their respective homelands.<sup>31</sup> The most influential foreigner in Russian ballet, the French choreographer Marius Petipa,<sup>32</sup> often referred to as the “father of classical ballet,” collaborated with composer Peter Tchaikovsky, to create many of the classic ballets still performed around the world today, including *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Swan Lake*. While ballet in Russia enjoyed illustrious success and international prestige

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<sup>30</sup> Solomon Volkov, *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 257.

<sup>31</sup> Some examples included famed Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni and pedagogues Christian Johansson of Denmark and Enrico Cecchetti of Italy.

<sup>32</sup> Petipa spent almost his entire adult life in Russia and was affectionately referred to as Marius Ivanovich.

during the nineteenth century, the tumultuous events that rocked the country at the beginning of the twentieth century threatened Russian ballet's existence.

Visions of ballerinas gracefully dancing across the stage of one of the most majestic theaters in the world clashed with the stated ambitions of the 1917 October Revolution. How could the Imperial Theater, an institution heavily patronized by the tsars find a role in a society that sought to expunge bourgeois elements from existence? To Lenin, ballet constituted, "a piece of pure landlord culture."<sup>33</sup> Despite the overt differences between ballerinas and Bolsheviks, the ballet theater not only survived the upheavals of 1917 but also thrived in Soviet society in part because Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment whose responsibilities included supervision of the arts, fought to preserve the cultural traditions and legacies inherited by the Bolsheviks.<sup>34</sup> When a debate flared over the value of classical ballet for the goals of the new government, Lunacharsky's intervention helped the art form find a new purpose in society. At the Twelfth Party Congress of the Communist Party in April 1923 a resolution helped solidify the role of ballet and the theater in the new regime by demanding that the theater educate the proletariat, publicize the struggle for communism and disseminate propaganda.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Sourtiz, *Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s*, trans. Lynn Vissaon, ed. Sally Banes (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Howard R. Hotler, "The Legacy of Lunacharsky and Artistic Freedom in the USSR," *Slavic Review* 29, no. 2 (1970): 263, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2493379>.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Grace Swift, *The Art of Dance in the U.S.S.R.* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press), 61.

Senior Petrograd<sup>36</sup> ballet critic Aleksandr Pleshcheev commented about the popularity of ballet among its new spectators: “The new audience, the masses who flocked to the ballet after its liberation from the subscribers, took a definitive stand: It valued the ballet and chose it as an accessible art. . . . The popular audience is sensitive, responsive, and perceptive.”<sup>37</sup> The popularity of the ballet was reflected in the fact that performances frequently sold out and performances continued uninterrupted throughout the Civil War period despite immense hardships.<sup>38</sup> Although he had once admonished ballet as “landlord culture,” even Lenin understood that the people would never forgive the Bolsheviks for allowing the dissolution of their cultural legacy when he later remarked, “It is too early for us to hand over the heritage of bourgeois art to the archives.”<sup>39</sup> The superiority of Russian ballet had come to occupy a source of inspiration and pride for its audience members and demanded a second act.<sup>40</sup>

The avant-garde ballets of the 1920s, choreographed by the Kirov Ballet’s then Artistic Director Fedor Lopukhov, however, enjoyed little critical acclaim or public success. The relative artistic freedoms enjoyed by artists of all genres during the New Economic Policy would be short lived. The following two decades brought declarations from the Party

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<sup>36</sup> After the outbreak of World War I the city of St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd, as the former name sounded too German. After the death of Lenin in 1924 the city was again renamed and became Leningrad. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 the city’s inhabitants voted to return back to the city’s original name of St. Petersburg.

<sup>37</sup> A. Pleshcheev, “O baletе, ego demokratizatsii, fokinizatsii i pr.,” *Vechernie ogni*, no. 8 (March 29, 1918): 4.

<sup>38</sup> Sourtiz, *Soviet Choreographers*, 43-44.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Martin J. Gannon, *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 28 Nations, Clusters of Nations, and Continents* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 341.

that stifled creativity in the theaters. In the 1930s, the quest to produce ballets that aligned with the precepts of socialist realism, art that illustrated an idealized socialist utopia for purposes of propaganda, proved difficult.<sup>41</sup> Despite having little in common with the ideals of socialist realism, the ballets created at the Imperial Theater during the tenure of Marius Petipa, complete with fairies, swans, and princesses continued to be performed in Moscow and Leningrad and remained popular with audiences. These ballets were deemed ideologically acceptable and stretched to fit into the cannon of socialist realism because of their general theme of “good overcoming evil.”<sup>42</sup> Despite ballet’s aristocratic origins, it fell into the cannon of *kulturnost’* or official Soviet culture. Stalin had an affinity for *Swan Lake*,<sup>43</sup> and historian Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, “the wife of a manager who was ignorant of Pushkin and had never seen *Swan Lake* was an embarrassment.”<sup>44</sup>

The Stalin-Zhdanov decree of 1946, whose policy became known as *zhdanovshchina*, further hampered creativity in the theaters by granting the party direct control over culture. According to historian Vladislav Zubok this, “killed genuine creativity, caused self censorship to metastasize, and opened the doors to mediocrities, careerists and intriguers.”<sup>45</sup> While the degree to which the government enforced *zhdanovshchina* varied throughout the Soviet period, Zubok’s assertion is illustrated in the process of deciding whether new choreographic works should receive premieres. New ballets, like choreographer Rostislav

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<sup>41</sup> Some rare examples of popular socialist realist ballets include *The Red Poppy* and *Flames of Paris*.

<sup>42</sup> Swift, *Dance in the USSR*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 82.

<sup>45</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 13.

Zakharov's "*Russia*" *Has Come into Port* (1964), received a recommendation for public performance from the Kirov's artistic council because of its inclusion of ideologically correct content.<sup>46</sup> The council disregarded the production's universally acknowledged poor artistic quality in order to meet the state's demand for ballets that expressed *sovermennost'* or contemporaneity.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, depending on the current political situation, new ballets could aim to express Marxist ideals and principals, Soviet patriotism, or the superiority of the Soviet system over the West.<sup>48</sup>

For some of the dancers performing in ballets on Soviet topics the choreography also constituted a source of artistic frustration. In her memoirs, famed dancer Natalia Makarova states, "At times, I was embarrassed to come out on stage – the choreography was so ridiculous."<sup>49</sup> In describing the ballet by choreographer Igor Bel'skii, *Leningrad Symphony* (1961), which depicted the Leningrad Siege during World War II, Makarova lamented, "I couldn't bear to get down on my knee with a weapon at the ready – the gesture was too ordinary, not removed enough from reality, and therefore false. . . . I felt the gesture to be alien to ballet in general."<sup>50</sup> Makarova's complaints reflect how the government's insistence for ballets about contemporary Soviet themes often trumped the creation of ballets with high artistic merit. Despite the creative limitations placed on the theaters, the guidelines for what stylistic elements were needed to constitute a "Soviet" ballet evolved over time from the

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<sup>46</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Swift, *The Art of Dance*, 68.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 289, 291-92.

<sup>49</sup> Natalia Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography* ed. Gennady Smakov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979, 77.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

*drambalet* fashion (ballets that consisted more of acting and pantomime than actual dancing and lacked complex choreography) of the 1940s and 50s, to the reintegration of formal dance vocabulary back into choreography, best embodied by Grigorovich's works.

During the Cold War battle for cultural supremacy with the United States, ballet artists became delegates of Soviet culture abroad. The preeminence of Soviet ballet played an essential role in the fight to prove the superiority of the socialist system over capitalism. Scholar David Caute has argued that "never before had empires felt so compelling a need to prove their virtue, to demonstrate their spiritual superiority, to claim the high ground of progress, to win public support and admiration by gaining ascendancy in each and every event which might be styled the Culture Olympics."<sup>51</sup> With the ostensible goal of promoting understanding between peoples of rival nations and the clandestine ambition to secure the sympathies of the citizens of their foe, the Soviet government utilized members of both the Kirov and the Bolshoi as cultural representatives on the other side of the Iron Curtain.<sup>52</sup>

Following Khrushchev's state visit to Great Britain in April 1956 and the subsequent initiative to advance cultural exchange between the two countries undertaken by Minister of Culture, Nikolai Mikhailov, the Bolshoi embarked on its first tour abroad to London at the beginning of October 1956.<sup>53</sup> The tour enjoyed both public and critical acclaim from the

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<sup>51</sup> David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 137.

<sup>53</sup> The Royal Ballet of London was supposed to reciprocate with a tour to Moscow, however; after the uprising in Hungary in late October 1956 and the Soviet government's response, the British tour to Moscow was cancelled. See: Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 151.

British people.<sup>54</sup> Over 55,000 people queued into the Royal Opera House over the course of the ten day tour; and over 9.5 million people, half of the adult television audience in Britain, gathered around their television sets to watch the BBC broadcast prima ballerina Galina Ulanova dance the second act of *Swan Lake*.<sup>55</sup> While British critics voiced some criticism about the Soviet style and choreography, Soviet authorities viewed the enormous public enthusiasm for the tour as a win in their quest to “capture the imagination of the West.”<sup>56</sup> The Bolshoi followed up its London tour with its first trip to the United States in 1959. While both tours enjoyed immense public success, the ballet artists toured under strict state control. Dancers could not travel without close supervision and specially appointed chaperones. Dancers of “questionable” background were barred altogether from the tours abroad.<sup>57</sup> The Kirov followed soon thereafter with tours to both England and America. Exchanges also worked in the opposite direction. The New York City Ballet performed in the Soviet Union for the first time in 1962.

Even though the ballet sought to advance the political and diplomatic goals of the Soviet government, through the objectives outlined at the Twelfth Party Congress and later through Cold War tours abroad, Ezrahi argues that ballet resisted the artistic limitations

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<sup>54</sup> Nick Higham, “Bankrupt Bolshoi Looks West,” *BBC News*, last modified January 22, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/258916.stm>.

<sup>55</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 154.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>57</sup> Star status at home did not guarantee permission to go abroad during this time. The Bolshoi’s Maya Plisetskaya claims she was excluded from the first few Bolshoi trips to the West because she was a relative of a purge victim; her father had been arrested and subsequently executed in the 30s. She also cites the fact that she had relatives living in the United States and was of Jewish origin as reasons for being prevented from touring. She finally received permission to travel with the company to the United States in the 1960s. Maïia Plisetskaïa, *Ia Maïia Plisetskaïa* (Moskva: Novosti, 1996), 151-58.



imposed by the government and truly failed to ever become “Sovietized.”<sup>58</sup> Ezrahi claims “the glory of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies continued to rest on the “class-alien” heritage of the prerevolutionary classical ballet repertoire created under the patronage of the tsars,”<sup>59</sup> and that “the ambiguity inherent in any system created room for the artistic repossession of creative freedom.”<sup>60</sup> While Ezrahi’s study concludes in 1968, I believe her argument concerning the pursuit of creative independence remained visible and increased at the Kirov under the leadership of Vinogradov, ceased at the Bolshoi under the control of Grigorovich, but remained alive in Moscow through the efforts of some of the leading Bolshoi dancers.

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<sup>58</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 9.

## Dancing to the West and Back

The year 1979 was a tense time in Soviet-American relations. The United States had responded to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with diplomatic protests, economic sanctions, and political threats; relations also became strained over America's new relationship with China.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the company's prolonged absence can be explained by three major defections that rocked the troupe on the fateful 1979 tour. During the company's New York City leg, the Bolshoi's male star Alexander Godunov sought asylum.<sup>62</sup> After his defection, Godunov received a contract to dance with Mikhail Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theater.<sup>63</sup> Three weeks later husband and wife Lenoid and Valentina Kozlov also asked for political refuge while touring with the Bolshoi in Los Angeles. The married couple subsequently began work with New York City Ballet.

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<sup>61</sup> Strobe Talbott, "U.S. – Soviet Relations: From Bad to Worse," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 3 (1979): 516, 523.

<sup>62</sup> An international incident ensued when Godunov's wife, the Bolshoi dancer Ludmilla Vlasova, boarded a Moscow bound Aeroflot flight at John F. Kennedy International Airport. The U.S. State Department held the plane on the tarmac for three days to ensure that Vlasova was returning to the Soviet Union out of her own free will. Vlasova received a hero's welcome upon her return home. The event created front-page headlines in both the United States and the Soviet Union. A year after his defection, Godunov and his wife divorced.

<sup>63</sup> After dancing four seasons with American Ballet Theater (ABT), Godunov's contract was not renewed. In a public statement ABT claimed there were no roles available for Godunov in the company's repertoire. Godunov later found success in Hollywood starring in the feature films *Die Hard* and *Witness* before his untimely death in 1995.

Seven years later high profile defection scandals no longer constituted a serious concern because of the new political environment. In 1986 the Bolshoi embarked on its first tour to America since 1979. One of the most visible signs of perestroika in the ballet theaters was manifested in an increased rate of international touring for full companies, especially to North America, and the opportunity for individual dancers to obtain guest contracts with foreign companies. This marked the first time in the Soviet era that individual dancers could regularly seek work outside of the country and then return home and continue working. While during the 1950s and 1960s the ballet companies and dancers toured abroad as pieces of the government's cultural cold war, now they ventured through a gradually lifting iron curtain to promote the Soviet Union's new "human face" to the world.<sup>64</sup> Motivations for touring and working abroad stemmed from a constant shortage of hard currency and opportunities for artistic growth. Touring and obtaining guest artist contracts provided the means for both the troupes and the dancers to survive during this often-unpredictable time. The newfound ease of international travel benefited not only dancers still residing in the Soviet Union, but also Soviet dancers who had earlier fled their native country.

The Bolshoi sought to profit from the acclaim and success it garnered abroad. After the Bolshoi's triumphant 1986 American tour the company returned to the United States again in 1989 and 1990. A description of a typical trip illuminates the reach of the tour across the country and how the company chose to present itself to American audiences through repertoire choice. Over the course of two months, for example, the 1990 tour stopped in New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, Honolulu, and Boston. The company primarily presented heritage classics including *Swan Lake*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and

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<sup>64</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 337.

*Giselle*, along with Grigorovich's *Ivan the Terrible* and a mixed bill program composed of scenes from Soviet classics including Grigorovich's *Spartacus* and *The Golden Age*.<sup>65</sup> The Bolshoi also toured extensively throughout Western Europe, Brazil, China, and Japan.

The Kirov took advantage of the new political situation in 1986 to embark on its first North American tour since the 1960s. The company returned to the United States again in 1987 and 1989. Cities on the itinerary for the two-month 1989 tour included New York City, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and Costa Mesa. The troupe presented *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Le Corsaire*, *La Bayadere*, Vinogradov's *Battleship Potemkin* and a mixed bill program.<sup>66</sup> Bolshoi and Kirov souvenir programs have glossy color photographs and contain analogous features, which contrasts sharply from the prosaic programs available for purchase at performances in the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup> The souvenir programs constitute an example of ballet diplomacy. The booklets describe the respective illustrious histories of each company, occasionally include a letter of welcome from the American president, and often the phrase "direct from the USSR," all of which highlight the political as well as artistic significance of each tour and points towards the utilization of Western style marketing.

The companies' travel stemmed from the need to attain hard currency to meet expenses. Once subsidized completely by the Soviet government, both theaters struggled to cover their expenses once the general economic climate deteriorated and the weakening

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<sup>65</sup> Bolshoi Ballet Souvenir Program, United States Tour, 1990, \*MGZB+ 95-5480, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>66</sup> Kirov Ballet Souvenir Program, United States Tour, 1989, \*MGZB + 91-9287, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>67</sup> These programs were printed on simple white paper, stated the name and year of the performance, who danced in the major roles of the ballet, and for an extra fee included a synopsis. Private Collection of Jacqueline Olich.

government could no longer guarantee the funds to operate. “The entire budget that we have from the state in the form of grants is barely enough to pay the salaries,” Vinogradov remarked to a *Dance Magazine* contributor.<sup>68</sup> The incessant touring by both companies fueled criticism in the press from the ballet scholar Vera Krasovskaya who chastised both Grigorovich and Vinogradov for abandoning the home audience in pursuit of capital.<sup>69</sup>

Touring also financially assisted individual dancers at every level of the company, from the girls in the back row of the *corps de ballet* to the principal ballerinas, supplementing their monthly salaries with extra payments for performances on tour in the form of hard currency. While the star dancers at the Bolshoi could receive up to 550 rubles a month, twice the national average, the salary for members of the *corps* ranged from 120 to 180 rubles a month.<sup>70</sup> Leading dancers from both companies also aimed to secure their own economic independence, and in some cases artistic independence as well, by negotiating guest artist contracts with foreign ballet companies.

In 1988, Bolshoi stars Nina Ananiashvili and Andris Liepa negotiated a three-week guest artist contract with the New York City Ballet (NYCB). At the invitation of Peter Martins, NYCB’s artistic director, the Soviet dancers performed in NYCB founder George Balanchine’s *Raymonda Variations* and *Symphony in C*.<sup>71</sup> This trip not only financially benefited the Bolshoi superstars, but also provided an opportunity for collaboration and

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<sup>68</sup> Undated correspondence between Oleg Vinogradov and Nina Alovert, box 63, fol 6, Richard Philp *Dance Magazine* records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>69</sup> Nancy Reynolds, “Setting Balanchine in Leningrad,” *Ballet Review* 71, no. 2 (1989): 48.

<sup>70</sup> Jeffery Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov: The Authorized Biography* (London: Fourth Estate, 1994): 111.

<sup>71</sup> Sheryl Flatow, “Ananiashvili and Liepa at the New York City Ballet: Glasnost in Action,” *Dance Magazine* 62, no. 6 (1988): 48.

artistic growth through learning and performing new choreographic works. The difference in Balanchine's style of choreography from the Soviet style, however, proved difficult for both dancers to master. In an interview with *Dance Magazine* about her appearances with NYCB Ananiashvili stated, "I'm amazed by the incredibly difficult small details of technique that the company performs so effortlessly. That has been the greatest problem for us because we don't move like that in our own ballets. . . . When we go home, we can show what we've learned--certain kinds of transitions, for instance."<sup>72</sup>

Before 1985, the idea of Soviet dancers performing Balanchine ballets in America, and then flying back to the Soviet Union without incident would have been unimaginable. Other star dancers from both companies also began making guest appearances abroad to supplement their incomes and artistic experiences at home. Leading dancers with the Bolshoi and the Kirov learned the solo and principal parts in the classical repertoire early in their careers and often performed these roles on stage only one or two times a month.<sup>73</sup> The combination of few premières, little possibility to learn new roles and choreography at home, and a dancer's relatively short stage career prompted many artists to seek international opportunities to expand their artistic growth.<sup>74</sup>

The Bolshoi star Irek Mukhamedov and Kirov dancers Altynai Asylmuratova and Faroukh Ruzimatov all leapt at the new opportunities to work abroad and explore new roles. For example, Rudolf Nureyev, while directing the Paris Opera Ballet, invited Mukhamedov

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 52, 94.

<sup>74</sup> V. Ural'skaia, "Trudnoe segodnia nashego baleta. A zavtra. . . ," *Sovetskii balet* 61, no. 6 (1991): 19-21.

to dance The Prince, the male lead, in Nureyev's staging of *The Sleeping Beauty*.<sup>75</sup> In almost a decade at the Bolshoi, Mukhamedov never once danced in this staple of the Bolshoi repertory. In the Soviet Union the role of the Prince was considered a *premier danseur* role, and therefore due to Mukhamedov's bulky muscular physique, which some thought created unappealing balletic bodylines, Grigorovich never cast him in this part. Mukhamedov also attained guest artist contracts with companies in England and other Western European countries.

Some Soviet dancers, however, expanded their time abroad from a few performances over a span of several weeks to an entire year of performing. Liepa returned to America as a guest artist for a whole season with American Ballet Theater in 1990.<sup>76</sup> "There no one, except for me decides my creative questions," Liepa explained to a Soviet readership how artists worked in America. "The artist has a contract for a year, and after that, if he is unhappy he can leave. Or, for example, he can tell the artistic director of the company that he has received an invitation to dance the new season with a different company, and will then subsequently return."<sup>77</sup> In an American press interview Liepa credited his new freedom of mobility to the new regime, "I think the authorities got tired of everybody defecting to the West; your ballet got better and better while ours got weaker and weaker. Maybe they finally

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<sup>75</sup> Although he rehearsed with the Paris Opera Ballet for this performance, due to a dancer strike in Paris Mukhamedov never got to perform the role with Nureyev's company.

<sup>76</sup> In 1993 Ananiashvili accepted a permanent position at American Ballet Theater as a principal dancer.

<sup>77</sup> Andris Liepa, "Ne khvataet baletmeisterov," *Sovetskii balet* 54, no. 5 (1990): 28.

listened to all the artists who later said they would prefer to live in Russia if they could be free to travel and try new things. Now we can do that.”<sup>78</sup>

Unprecedented exchanges also occurred between the artistic staff of Soviet ballet institutions and American ballet companies and ballet schools. In May 1990 former Kirov Ballet Artistic Director Konstantin Sergeev and his wife, former ballerina Natalia Dudinskaia, staged Sergeev’s 1950 production of *Swan Lake* at the Boston Ballet, incorporating both American and Soviet dancers in the production.<sup>79</sup> Dubbed the “glasnost *Swan Lake*” because the realization of the production could have occurred only as a result of Soviet reforms, the première marked the first ever full-scale partnership between American and Soviet ballet artists.<sup>80</sup> American ballet students also expressed excitement and enthusiasm when Soviet pedagogues traveled to the United States to teach American dancers at popular ballet summer intensives. The Bolshoi Ballet Academy at Vail, Colorado, started accepting students for a 1989 summer session that brought the head of the Bolshoi Ballet School in Moscow, Sophia Golovkina, to teach American students.<sup>81</sup> In the fall of 1990, President George H.W. Bush welcomed Oleg Vinogradov along with five other Soviet teachers to Washington, D.C., to begin teaching classes at the newly established Kirov Academy of Ballet. The school aimed to train its students for careers as professional ballet

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<sup>78</sup> Andris Liepa interview, 1989, box 14, fol 5, *Eye on Dance* records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>79</sup> The cast for the leading roles of Odette/Odile and The Prince were rotated between Ananiashvili and Aleksei Fadeechev of the Bolshoi and Asylmuratova, Ruzimatov, and Konstantin Zaklinskii of the Kirov, along with principal members of the Boston Ballet.

<sup>80</sup> Olga Maynard, “In The Boston Tradition: Swan Lake, USA- USSR,” *Dance Magazine* 64, no. 5 (1990): 39.

<sup>81</sup> Bolshoi Ballet Academy at Vail, Colorado Conert Program, 1989, box 34, fol 2, Richard Philp *Dance Magazine* records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.



dancers. Vinogradov and the artistic staff selected aspiring dancers for the school from all over the United States on a national audition tour.<sup>82</sup>

The increased mobility of Soviet artists extended to dancers living in the Soviet Union as well as to Soviet dancers who had grabbed international headlines for defecting in the 1960s and 1970s. On February 1, 1989, Makarova *chasséd* onto the stage of the Kirov Theater for the first time in eighteen years. Nearly two decades earlier while on tour with the Kirov Ballet in London, Makarova caused an international uproar when she sought political asylum in the West. Her return to Leningrad marked the first time a dancer who had defected received permission to perform on Soviet soil.<sup>83</sup> Notably, instead of choosing to present one of the many works of the Russian classical ballet repertoire, such as *Swan Lake* or *The Sleeping Beauty*, Makarova and her French partner danced two *pas de deux* from British choreographer John Cranko's *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>84</sup> Makarova's homecoming constituted the realization of a previously impossible dream for the famed ballerina. Just eight years earlier after being questioned about her desire to perform again in her native country, Makarova responded, "It's impossible, so why think about it?"<sup>85</sup>

The newfound ability to fulfill Makarova's formerly unimaginable wish may have stemmed from the recent overturning in spring 1988 of the Stalinist policy of

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<sup>82</sup> Press materials, 1990, box 41, fol 3, *Eye on Dance* records, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>83</sup> Makarova had been allowed to perform the second act of *Swan Lake* with the Kirov Ballet while on its London tour in August 1988. This marked the first time an artist who had emigrated to the West gained permission to dance with a Soviet company.

<sup>84</sup> Based on the classic novel of the same name set in St. Petersburg by Alexander Pushkin.

<sup>85</sup> Esther Fein, "Makarova, Home Again, Dances at the Kirov," *New York Times*, February 3, 1989.

*zhdanovshchina*, which had granted the Party control over life in the cultural sphere.<sup>86</sup>

Defector stars Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov also received invitations to perform in their homeland in 1989. Nureyev had been granted permission the prior year to visit his dying mother in Ufa; however, his visit was kept secret from the public and only those close to the Nureyev family knew of his trip.<sup>87</sup> Nureyev's public return, in which he performed the male lead in *La Sylphide* at the Kirov, occurred in November 1989.<sup>88</sup> Markarova and Nureyev received enthusiastic praise from the public, along with showers of flowers and gifts. Both dancers, however, were well past the heyday of their stage careers, and the Soviet press and the public lamented the missed opportunities to see these stars perform in their prime. The Kozlovs' first voyage back to their homeland transpired in 1991 when they participated in an international dance festival in Moscow. Some celebrated dancers had more complicated relationships with their Soviet pasts. Notably, Baryshnikov rejected the chance to perform in the Soviet Union until after its demise.<sup>89</sup> Despite the celebrations and successes of returned stars and the integration of Soviet dancers with the West, the artistic director of

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<sup>86</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 343.

<sup>87</sup> In order to receive permission to visit his mother, Nureyev had to obtain a dispensation from a seven-year prison sentence. After his defection in 1961 Nureyev had been found guilty of treason. French President Francois Mitterrand appealed directly to Gorbachev on Nureyev's behalf. Mitterrand's efforts resulted in a Soviet visa for Nureyev valid for thirty-six hours. Nureyev, however, was still nervous about the possibility of being sent to Siberia upon arrival and therefore contacted his friend Jacqueline Onassis "to sound the alarm if I'm not back in Paris after three days." Senator Edward Kennedy wrote a letter to the Soviet ambassador in Washington requesting that Nureyev's trip go smoothly.

<sup>88</sup> Julie Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev* (London: Fig Tree, 2007), 638.

<sup>89</sup> Although Baryshnikov was invited back to the Soviet Union, along with Makarova and Nureyev, he chose not to return. Baryshnikov would instead return to his hometown of Riga, Latvia, where he was born to Russian parents, for the first time in 1997 where he performed modern pieces from his contemporary dance company the White Oak Dance Project. Baryshnikov had stated at the time of his defection in 1974 that he never wanted to return to the Soviet Union.

the main ballet theater in the nation's capital disregarded the transformations occurring around him and continued to cling to power and resist change despite protestations from dancers and, eventually, the press.

### **“The Stalin of Soviet Ballet”**

In January 1989 Irek Mukhamedov failed to appear at Convent Garden in London to perform at a fund-raising gala benefiting victims of the recent Armenian earthquake. Even though at this time the Soviet Union enjoyed a more relaxed political environment, rumors circulated that Mukhamedov, who was handpicked by Grigorovich to join the Bolshoi as a principal dancer after winning the 1980 Moscow international ballet competition, desired to settle permanently in the West and that KGB agents were responsible for Mukhamedov's unexplained absence. These rumors, however, proved to be false. Mukhamedov's nonappearance in London resulted from the eruption of ongoing tension at the Bolshoi Theater between Grigorovich and dancers in the company. Mukhamedov stayed in Moscow in order to speak on behalf of Grigorovich at a meeting of the Bolshoi Ballet Collective.

Members of the collective had organized the gathering to appeal to the General Director of the Bolshoi Theater, Vladimir Kokonin, and through him to the minister of culture, to demand a change in the troupe's artistic leadership. Mukhamedov, a staunch Grigorovich supporter, chastised those at the gathering for creating trouble for the company, accused them of betraying not only Grigorovich but also their country, and called for the dancers of the previous generation to retire in order to create room for young blood.<sup>90</sup> Several

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<sup>90</sup> Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov Authorized Biography*, 130.

years later, reflecting on his remarks, Mukhamedov deeply regretted the words he spoke at that meeting in defense of a man who many had come to view as the Stalin of Soviet ballet.<sup>91</sup>

Yuri Grigorovich arrived at the Bolshoi Ballet, a company composed of over two hundred dancers, in 1964 fresh off the triumph of his successful stagings of *Legend of Love* and *The Stone Flower* in Leningrad. Born in the second city in the late 1920s, Grigorovich had trained at the Leningrad Choreographic Institute,<sup>92</sup> and danced briefly with the Kirov Ballet before beginning his career as a choreographer. He represents an example of artistic talent transferred by the government from Leningrad to Moscow. During his years at the Moscow-based company, Grigorovich created numerous Soviet classics including *Spartacus*, *Ivan the Terrible*, and *The Golden Age*, and also restaged classical heritage ballets. Many in Leningrad considered Grigorovich and his early works products of the Khrushchev era thaw. Although they broke free from the *drambalet* style, which emphasized acting over dancing, of the Soviet ballets of the 1940s and 50s, his ballets still retained Soviet themes.<sup>93</sup> *Spartacus* fit the bill for a Soviet ballet because of its score, created by Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian, and the ability to draw comparisons between its historical plot, slaves facing oppression in ancient Rome, to oppression experienced in modern times by those living in capitalist countries.<sup>94</sup>

The creation of ballets reflecting Soviet themes and topics took on special significance at the Bolshoi, for the ballet company not only had to perform on its home stage,

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<sup>91</sup> T. Kuznetsova, *Khroniki Bol'shogo baleta* (Moskva: Natalis, 2010), 9.

<sup>92</sup> Renamed the Vaganova Ballet Academy after the pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova's death in 1952.

<sup>93</sup> Kuznetsova, *Khroniki Bol'shogo baleta*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 212.

but was also required to present productions on the Kremlin Palace of Deputies stage, which had been built specifically for Party meetings and activities. Ezrahi asserts that the Bolshoi's presence at this theater signified the Moscow company's closeness to political power and that this association also brought its set of own problems.<sup>95</sup> Although Ezrahi does not elaborate on these issues, I believe that over time the pressures associated with the obligation to frequently perform for top Party officials resulted in the company's leadership imposing a stricter adherence to Soviet artistic standards in the capital.

The pressure to create for the top brass of the Party may help account for Grigorovich's transformation from celebrated choreographer to "mini-Stalin." In her autobiography, Bolshoi principal Ekaterina Maksimova recalls the wonderful working relationship and friendship she enjoyed with Grigorovich during his early years at the theater, but then notes a gradual negative change in their relations and the artistic director's behavior.<sup>96</sup> Previously, if Maksimova offered suggestions to the ballet master when in rehearsals he gladly accepted them and it did not matter to anyone whether these proposals ended up in the final piece of choreography.<sup>97</sup> As time progressed, however, suggestions, no matter how well intended, were viewed by Grigorovich as a personal insult and a question of his authority.<sup>98</sup> Grigorovich's thirty-year tenure at the Bolshoi Ballet also included scandal, deep-seeded conflict, and a loss of creative prowess. The Bolshoi emerged at a cross section between international and personal politics. With the commencement of the political

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>96</sup> Ekaterina Maksimova, *Madam "net"* (Moskva: AST-Press kn, 2003), 205.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 206.

crackdown that ended the thaw, Grigorovich's leadership style soon reflected that which resided in the Kremlin; in order to live and work in peace one needed to keep the status quo and not outwardly defy authority. This, however, did not stop some of the most famous dancers at the Bolshoi from trying to find their own creative fulfillment.

Even before the onset of perestroika and glasnost star Bolshoi dancers sought to challenge Grigorovich's choreographic and artistic hegemony despite his firm grasp on power. Ballet artists, including the internationally celebrated prima ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, husband and wife team Vladimir Vasiliev and Ekaterina Maksimova, and dancer Mikhail Lavrovskii all clamored to find their own artistic voices and independence. In a 1976 television interview after the premiere of Grigorovich's ballet *Angara*, which showcases a dam-construction team in Irkutsk, Vasiliev harshly criticized both the ballet and the choreography.<sup>99</sup> In 1979 Grigorovich created a new version of the classic *Romeo and Juliet* to replace the 1950s production by Leonid Lavrovskii. Outraged over the poor quality of Grigorovich's choreography and the ousting of a treasured piece, Vasiliev, Maksimova, and M. Lavrovskii successfully petitioned the Ministry of Culture to restore the original ballet to the Bolshoi's repertoire.<sup>100</sup>

Lead dancers at the Bolshoi, who, with the exception of the elder Plisetskaya, all came of age during the thaw, wanted to dance choreography that utilized movement outside of the traditional classroom vocabulary and borrow movement from the flourishing world of modern dance, something that Grigorovich strongly opposed incorporating into the Bolshoi

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<sup>99</sup> Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov*, 113.

<sup>100</sup> Luke Jennings, "Nights at the Ballet: The Czar's Last Dance," *The New Yorker* 71, (March, 27, 1995): 77.

repertoire.<sup>101</sup> Those who opposed Grigorovich enjoyed occasional small victories, but found true artistic freedom only outside the walls of the Bolshoi Theater, either through special permission to travel abroad, or once the political situation became more relaxed, by the greater opportunities to travel internationally.

Although these Bolshoi dancers dealt with impediments to their creative dreams throughout Grigorovich's tenure, until Godunov's 1979 flight every major defection, beginning with Nureyev in 1961, had involved a Kirov dancer. What accounts for this exodus from Leningrad but not from the capital? Each dancer had his or her own personal reasons for remaining in the Soviet Union; however, the Bolshoi's location in Moscow undoubtedly played a role in the lack of defections from the country's preeminent theater. Historian Vladislav Zubok asserts that mini artistic and intellectual "oases" existed in Moscow in the 1970s, which helped the creative and intellectual elite persevere through the Brezhnev years.<sup>102</sup> "The separation of intellectuals and artists," which I assert included star Bolshoi dancers, "from the rest of the Soviet population by a network of privileges and special access to material benefits was, paradoxically, a contributing factors in the continuation and preservation of their oases."<sup>103</sup> The significant number of high profile defections from the Kirov illustrates that Zubok's idea of "oases" did not necessarily exist in Leningrad as well. While the dancers in Moscow could find solace away from Grigorovich in their mini "oases," until the arrival of Vinogradov in 1977 the Kirov dancers had to take the more drastic step of defection in order to escape.

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<sup>101</sup> Walter Terry interview with Grigorovich, May 21, 1975, \*MGZMT 5-229, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>102</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 323.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.



Maya Plisetskaya created her own personal oasis during Grigorovich's reign in Moscow. Plisetskaya had already been performing with the Bolshoi for twenty years when Grigorovich became artistic director in 1964. After two decades dancing in the leading roles of classical ballet, Plisetskaya yearned for new artistic and creative challenges. She lamented, "Dancing the old repertoire . . . would it really be like this to the end of my ballet days? Just *Swan Lake*? Anxiety tormented me. Frustration. I needed something new, something my own."<sup>104</sup> In 1967 she utilized her influence as a winner of the Lenin Prize to acquire for herself a ballet outside of the theater repertoire. Plisetskaya worked with Cuban choreographer Alberto Alonso to create the ballet *Carmen Suite*. As a rule, foreign choreographers did not receive invitations to work at the Bolshoi, but because Alonso hailed from Cuba, a brother socialist country, Plisetskaya obtained special permission for the choreographer to work at the capital theater.<sup>105</sup>

While collaborating with Alonso proved artistically gratifying for Plisetskaya, after the first performance, which received mostly negative reviews, the prima ballerina still faced a struggle securing more performance dates for the piece and in retaining its original choreography.<sup>106</sup> The Soviet Minister of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva proclaimed, "It's a great failure comrades. The production is raw. Nothing but eroticism . . . the concept has to be rethought. I have grave doubts whether the ballet can be redone. It's an alien path."<sup>107</sup> Furtseva also demanded a change to the costumes and the removal of "provocative lifts"

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<sup>104</sup> Plisetskaya, *Ia Maiia Plisetskaya*, 268.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-75.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

from the choreography.<sup>108</sup> Plisetskaya had aspired to perform the piece on the Bolshoi's upcoming Canadian tour, but the Ministry of Culture forbade the work from being danced abroad because it was not thought to be representative of the prestige of the Bolshoi Theater and did not conform to the cultural image the Soviet Union insisted on presenting abroad.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the disappointment surrounding *Carmen Suite*, Plisetskaya did not relent in her quest to seek her own creative outlet and her fierce pursuit of independence made her an enemy of Grigorovich. After several great struggles with cultural authorities her desire to work with other Western choreographers was eventually fulfilled and she even began to choreograph pieces for herself. In the 1970s she worked with French choreographers Mauric Bejart and Roland Petit in their home country. Trips abroad were still available only to a select privileged group of artists and intellectuals. Zubok asserts that these trips constituted another kind of oasis for the elite, "the trips gave the temporary effect of euphoria, liberation, and excitement, while offering an escape from the squalor, humiliation, and fear of everyday Soviet life."<sup>110</sup>

Plisetskaya built upon her own personal oasis at home when she received permission to choreograph the ballets *Anna Karenina* (1972), *The Seagull* (1980), and *Lady with a Lapdog* (1985) at the Bolshoi. Plisetskaya battled vigorously for each of her victories, and no other Bolshoi dancer enjoyed the same extent of privileges during Grigorovich's tenure. Commenting on Plisetskaya in her autobiography, Makarova characterizes Plisetskaya's behavior as a "phenomenon particularly characteristic of Moscow," and goes on to note that

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>110</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 328.

similar actions in Leningrad were not tolerated.<sup>111</sup> Plisetskaya's struggle against the artistic director's dominance, however, opened the door for others to push for similar opportunities, resulting in a deep division in the company that became public knowledge with the publishing of established ballet critic Vadim Gaevsky's 1981 book entitled *Divertissement*.<sup>112</sup>

In *Divertissement*, Gaevsky delineates the development of classical ballet in Russia and the Soviet Union over the previous hundred and fifty years. Controversy over the book's publication centered around a small section that sheds light on the internal quarrels at the Bolshoi and criticizes Grigorovich's leadership of the company.<sup>113</sup> Gaevsky divides members of the troupe into two camps; those who supported Grigorovich, which included among others the artistic director's wife Natalia Bessmertnova, and those who opposed the head ballet master, including Plisetskaya, Maksimova, and Vasiliev. Gaevsky cites the main impetus for the split as the dancers' desire for more modern choreography and a broader choreographic vocabulary.<sup>114</sup> It is interesting to note that dancers primarily from the older generations constituted the group that opposed Grigorovich, while younger dancers remained loyal to the ballet master. The opposing positions, based on age, likely stemmed from the relatively short stage life of a dancer's career: older dancers literally had less time to dance new choreography, and the younger dancers viewed Grigorovich as someone who could help

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<sup>111</sup> Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 42.

<sup>112</sup> Vadim Gaevskii, *Divertissement* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1981).

<sup>113</sup> Nina Dimitrievitch, "Review of *Divertissement* by Vadim Gaevskii," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 1, no. 2 (1983): 84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1290764>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

them establish a successful career.<sup>115</sup> Gaevsky also attributed the company's lack of innovation to Grigorovich and accused him of being a mini dictator.<sup>116</sup>

Soviet authorities banned the book and removed it from store shelves. The volume's editor, Serge Nikolin, was expelled from his editorial position and authorities prohibited Gaevsky from publishing for the next five years.<sup>117</sup> Had the book been produced six or seven years later the controversy surrounding its publication would certainly not have arisen. Gaevsky's 1981 book seems to foreshadow the proliferation of periodicals, newspaper articles, and other texts that critique the Soviet regime and its leaders at the end of the 1980s, and also exposes the inner workings and conflicts of the Bolshoi into the public eye.

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<sup>115</sup> Bolshoi dancer Irek Mukhamedov represented the younger camp.

<sup>116</sup> Dimitrivich, "Review of *Divertissement*," 81.

<sup>117</sup> Kuznetsova, *Khroniki Bol'shogo baleta*, 24.

### **The Intersection of Personal vs. International Politics**

The infighting at the Bolshoi left Grigorovich without a star male dancer who exhibited loyalty to the artistic director. By the beginning of the 1980s, Vasiliev and Lavrovskii had long fallen out of favor with Grigorovich and declared their allegiances with the older generation. Grigorovich found the male star he sought, someone young who would not question his artistic authority in Irek Mukhamedov. Mukhamedov had graduated from the Moscow Ballet School in 1978, but had been initially passed over for a spot at the Bolshoi and danced with the Moscow Classical Ballet.<sup>118</sup> Entering the Bolshoi as the young protégé of the artistic director meant Mukhamedov had very little contact or interaction with the dancers who opposed the head ballet master.

Grigorovich created the male lead of his 1982-piece *The Golden Age* for Mukhamedov, set to music by Dmitri Shostakovich. It was the last new work that Grigorovich choreographed and echoed the ballet master's previous works. The ballet has been described as "a simple tale of communist ideals vanquishing bourgeois decadence"<sup>119</sup> and, although it represented a new piece of choreography, it did not achieve the same level of choreographic innovation as works by George Balanchine or Maurice Bejart. An American

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<sup>118</sup> In Mukhamedov's authorized autobiography the author seems to hint that the reason he did not receive a Bolshoi contract right after graduation was because of his Tatar background.

<sup>119</sup> Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov Authorized Biography*, 99.

dance critic commented that “Grigorovich’s choreography is an acquired taste – you either find it exciting to watch or see it as merely a display of gymnastic virtuosity.”<sup>120</sup>

As the decade progressed and public criticism in the press became more widespread Grigorovich’s leadership of the Bolshoi came under attack and publicly pitted those who supported the artistic director against those who rejected his authority. Mukhamedov, the brightest young star at the Bolshoi at the time, assumed the role of Grigorovich’s main supporter, while stars of the older generation, including Plisetksaya, distanced themselves from the head ballet master. Both sides frequently found themselves at the convergence of international and personal politics.

Under the openness of the glasnost era the personal loyalties and divisions within the theater were increasingly transparent. Worried about the position of their director, Grigorovich defenders expressed their discontent over the criticism of their ballet master by refusing to take to the stage at a March 1988 performance of *The Stone Flower*. The dancers in Grigorovich’s camp were worried about Grigorovich being removed from his post and demanded a personal guarantee from Gorbachev that the artistic director would not be replaced. Grigorovich’s followers called on Mukhamedov to appeal directly to the General Secretary on behalf of the ballet master. After speaking with Mukhamedov, Gorbachev called in the minister of culture to reassure the protesting dancers that Grigorovich’s position was secure and the performance finally began.<sup>121</sup>

Despite the assurance of his security, later the same year Grigorovich reluctantly caved into the demand for modernism at the ballet theater and invited Roland Petit to stage

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<sup>120</sup> Margaret Willis, “Back from the USSR: Bolshoi Blockbuster,” *Dance Magazine* 61, no. 7 (1987): 36.

<sup>121</sup> Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov*, 135-36.

his 1959 ballet, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Petit desired for Grigorovich to allow Mukhamedov to dance the main role in the ballet.<sup>122</sup> Mukhamedov, naïve to the politics of the situation, agreed to dance the part thereby infuriating Grigorovich who viewed the dancer's willingness to work with Petit as a personal betrayal.<sup>123</sup>

After personally intervening on behalf of Grigorovich several times<sup>124</sup> and receiving little gratitude or acknowledgement in return, combined with the desire to escape from a jealous ex-wife and provide for a new baby, Mukhamedov considered permanently leaving the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>125</sup> The opportunities to dance abroad could no longer completely satisfy Mukhamedov artistically, and now that he had fallen out of favor with Grigorovich he knew that if he remained in Moscow he would spend the last viable years of his performing career constantly in conflict with the artistic director.

After much thought and planning, in June 1990, Mukhamedov and his second wife, also a dancer with the Bolshoi, decided to quietly leave the Soviet Union for England. Mukhamedov received a contract to dance with the Royal Ballet of London. Perhaps Mukhamedov also thought of the fate of Andris Liepa's father, Marius Liepa, an acclaimed dancer at the Bolshoi for years, who, after a falling out with Grigorovich, struggled to find artistic fulfillment. In a diary entry dated March 14, 1982, he wrote "any artist can continue

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>124</sup> Mukhamedov stood up for Grigorovich, in March 1989 when he jumped off the Bolshoi stage during the final curtain call at Grigorovich's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary gala to chase down a women demonstrator. The demonstrator outlandishly claimed that Grigorovich murdered the dancer Marius Liepa, a strong opponent of Grigorovich who had just recently died.

<sup>125</sup> Taylor, *Irek Mukhamedov*, 181.

without money, even for sometime without love, without friends. . . . But he cannot live, survive without new roles, without new work. He suffocates.”<sup>126</sup>

Unwilling to “suffocate,” Plisetskaya, Maksimova, and Vasiliev were forced out of the Bolshoi company during the 1987-88 season, ostensibly because all three dancers had long ago surpassed the usual dancer retirement age of thirty-eight, but also because of their opposition to Grigorovich.<sup>127</sup> None of the dancers, however, retired from performing. Although they no longer frequently danced the roles that had launched them into stardom, Plisetskaya as Odette/Odiele in *Swan Lake* and Vasiliev as the title role in *Spartacus*, they still performed in their own ballets. They each received countless offers to dance abroad and perform modern roles.<sup>128</sup>

Traditionally, upon reaching retirement age dancers are invited to work as teachers and coaches in the ballet school and with the main company from which they retired in order to ensure proper technique, to help interpret the nuances of different ballet roles, and, more generally, to assure that ballet traditions are passed down from one generation to the next. Grigorovich’s halting of this custom in favor of his authority was a great loss to the theater.<sup>129</sup> Even if those who opposed Grigorovich had been invited to work with the company as artistic coaches, it is doubtful if young dancers would have been willing to collaborate with the retired stars who had opposed the artistic director out of fear of the possible repercussions.

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<sup>126</sup> Marius Liepa, “Ia ukhozhu” *Ogonek*, no. 35 (1989): 11- 12.

<sup>127</sup> B. L’vov-Anokhin, *Vladimir Vasil’ev* (Moskva: Isentrpoligraf, 1998), 330.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 331.



In April 1989, to mark his fiftieth birthday, Vasiliev acquired permission to present his own choreographic works on the Bolshoi stage for the first time. At this jubilee performance, Vasiliev danced in *Anyuta*, and the one-act ballets *Nostalgia* and *Fragments of One Biography*. Vasiliev had choreographed and presented these works earlier in the decade at different theaters across Europe. The première of *Anyuta*, for example, occurred at the San Carlo Theater in Naples, Italy. To fill the other roles in the ballets, dancers from the Moscow Classical Ballet were used because the Bolshoi could not provide the needed dancers.<sup>130</sup> I suspect the combination of Bolshoi dancers involved in other engagements abroad and a fear of participating in a performance with an adversary of the artistic director, who certainly could not have been enthusiastic about the performance, explains the “shortage” of available dancers in a company of over two hundred members.

Glasnost had finally allowed for public criticism of Grigorovich, yet the artistic director remained in power even after the Soviet Union ceased to exist. While nearly everything else in the former Soviet Union had transformed dramatically almost overnight, Grigorovich endured. In a September 1992 interview, Plisetskaya had dramatically remarked, “at the moment, it’s impossible to work at the Bolshoi Theater because *Sovetskaia vlast* – Soviet power – is still in existence there. And there are no dancers, because there’s no repertoire. Just one dictator, like Stalin.”<sup>131</sup>

After a series of failed and embarrassing international tours, public criticism about the quality of artistic talent among dancers that was primarily blamed on Grigorovich, lingering tensions and factions in the company, and a redesign of the company’s contract system

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>131</sup> Jennings, “Nights at the Ballet,” 83.

Grigorovich resigned from his position in March 1995 at the age of sixty eight. Although his career as artistic director at the nation's leading ballet theater had begun promisingly, Grigorovich's tenure at the Bolshoi resulted in the artistic decline of the theater. Many of the creative and artistic debates that emerged under his leadership still remain points of contention among the dancers and artistic staff of the Bolshoi today, despite Grigorovich's departure almost twenty years ago. The leadership at the country's second ballet company, the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, however, aimed to invigorate the artistic and creative life of Soviet ballet almost eight years before Gorbachev's ascent to power and has grappled with a different set of challenges.

## **Vinogradov and the Kirov Ballet**

Besides the return of formerly scorned ballet dancers, another homecoming to Leningrad in 1989 exemplifies the influence of glasnost in the ballet theaters. This journey, however, was not completed by a ballet artist, but by two pieces choreographed by George Balanchine. Many observers consider Balanchine, the founder of the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet, the greatest choreographer of the twentieth century. Born Giorgi Balanchivadze in St. Petersburg in 1904, Balanchine trained at the Imperial Ballet School and danced with the Mariinsky Ballet before fleeing the Soviet Union in 1924.<sup>132</sup> In America he developed his own school of classical ballet technique that he infused into his innovative and modern choreography. Although celebrated throughout the world, Balanchine's ballets, which differed immensely from the Russian heritage classics and Soviet ballets, had been performed in the Soviet Union only during New York City Ballet's 1962 tour.

Balanchine ballets typically lack a concrete story line, contain minimal costumes and sets, and draw from movement outside of the traditional academic ballet vocabulary. The characteristics that compose a Balanchine work therefore encompass many of the elements that had been most disdained by Soviet authorities. Ezrahi states that "the regime's rejection of abstraction, modernism, and formalism reflected its fear of ambiguity and its desire for

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<sup>132</sup> Before moving to America in the late twenties, Balanchine choreographed works for Sergei Diaghilev's famed Ballet Russes.

control.” Balanchine ballets could offer a “dangerous scope for interpretation beyond the regime’s control.”<sup>133</sup> Therefore, the first official staging of a Balanchine ballet by a Soviet company, which took place in February 1989 at the behest of the Kirov Ballet’s Artistic Director Oleg Vinogradov, constitutes such a significant event.<sup>134</sup>

While this event reflected the new possibilities facilitated by the Gorbachev era at the Kirov Theater, for example the overturning of the Stalinist policy of *zhdanovshchina*, Vinogradov had begun to innovate and reintegrate the ballet company with Western choreographers and encouraged the growth and development of Soviet choreographers almost a decade before Gorbachev assumed his role as general secretary of the Communist Party. Although Vinogradov’s attempts to modernize the Kirov Ballet during the late 1970s and early 1980s still encountered some difficulties and limitations they helped revamp a deteriorating company and illustrate an example of cultural ferment in Leningrad. The impetus to set Balanchine in Leningrad did not exist in a vacuum, but emerged from a strong desire to see Western influences in a Soviet institution.

Ten years younger than Grigorovich, Vinogradov had trained at the Leningrad Choreographic Institute and graduated in the same class as Nureyev. Prior to his appointment at the Kirov Ballet, Vinogradov had worked at the Novosibirsk State Opera and Ballet Theater and the Maly Ballet Theater in Leningrad. When the ballet master took command in

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<sup>133</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 235.

<sup>134</sup> The Georgian State Ballet had performed Balanchine’s *Serenade* in 1984; however, this was not considered an authentic staging because the company did not have permission from the Balanchine Trust, an organization established upon Balanchine’s death in 1983 to ensure all future productions of the master’s work were presented accurately. The ballet was recreated from a videotape made for television and the production was filled with choreographic inaccuracies. The Maly Theater in Leningrad also utilized videotapes for unofficial productions of Balanchine’s *Serenade*, *Symphony in C*, and, *The Four Temperaments* in the 1980s.

1977 of the Kirov Ballet, also comprised of over two hundred dancers, he inherited a ballet troupe in a state of crisis and stagnation. The troupe was still licking its wounds from the recent defections of talented dancers, recovering from the unexpected death of the star Yuri Solov'ev, and had presented only three premières since 1973, none of which proved successful or stayed in the theater's repertoire.<sup>135</sup> The company also continued to suffer from artistic losses to Moscow, which twelve years prior had included the transfer of Grigorovich from Leningrad to the capital. Ezrahi notes that "the Kirov Theater's position was defined by the regime's general suspicion of Leningrad and its determination to turn the Bolshoi into the premier company of the country, leading to a diversion of artistic talent from the Kirov to the Bolshoi."<sup>136</sup>

Similar to other institutions during the later years of the Brezhnev era, the company desperately needed a systematic overhaul. Dancers of pensioner age constituted the majority of the artistic performers, the active repertoire comprised only ten ballets, and invitations to embark on tours from foreign impresarios arrived rarely.<sup>137</sup> Vinogradov enthusiastically responded to the challenges of his new position, although many artists ridiculed his restructuring of the company. In addition to choreographing new works for the Kirov, Vinogradov also revitalized the *corps de ballet*, dismissed dancers of pensioner age, fired those who had been "stashed" at the theater yet continued to receive a salary.<sup>138</sup> In his

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<sup>135</sup> In his auto-biography, Vinogradov notes, that at nearly every ballet theater in the company, of which there were more than fifty, the repertoire consisted of the same stale and expected ballets. He notes exceptions in only Tallinn, Perm, and Tbilisi. Oleg Vinogradov, *Ispoved' baletmeistera* (Moskva: AST- Press kn., 2007), 288.

<sup>136</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 79.

<sup>137</sup> Vinogradov, *Ispoved' baletmeistera*, 229.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

autobiography, Vinogradov, who never joined the Party, notes that many theater employees clung to their Party memberships, not out of a conviction of communist ideals, but instead out of the desire to simply have a job and a position in life.<sup>139</sup>

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, despite the reallocating of artistic talent from the Kirov to the Bolshoi, Leningrad had emerged as the center for new choreography in the Soviet Union, building upon the city's reputation, which harkened back to the Imperial era, as the country's ballet capital.<sup>140</sup> Ezrahi believes that the Kirov's distance from Moscow contributed to the growth of choreographic innovation in Leningrad during this period.<sup>141</sup> I assert that Vinogradov, aware of this history, desired to return the Kirov to its previous stature. Vinogradov sought to modernize the company's repertoire by inviting Western choreographers to bring their creations to Leningrad already in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1977 Vinogradov received permission to invite the French choreographer Roland Petit to stage his 1965 ballet *The Hunched Back of Notre Dame*. This constituted the first time a Western choreographer staged his own choreography for the Kirov Ballet and for Vinogradov, Petit's trip became his first victory as artistic director. The ballet master's dealings with cultural authorities to negotiate Petit's journey to Leningrad, however, resulted in accusations being hurled at Vinogradov for being a sympathizer of formalism, modernism and pornography. In order to gain permission to bring Petit to the Soviet Union Vinogradov

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<sup>139</sup> For more on everyday life during this period, see: Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the post-Stalin Era* (Boston: Little Brown, 1990); Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>140</sup> Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 72.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

enlisted the assistance of Leningrad Party members. Official permission for the French choreographer's trip required a great deal of hassle and a degree of danger for those involved.

Petit's 1978 Kirov production of *The Hunched Back of Notre Dame* resonated with audiences and stayed in the Kirov's repertoire for many years. Vinogradov expressed particular satisfaction with the amount of artistic growth and development experienced by his dancers from their time working with Petit.<sup>142</sup> Under Vinogradov's auspices, the Kirov also presented two of Danish choreographer August Bourneville's most famed works, *La Sylphide* and *Napoli*. Bourneville expert Elise Marianne von Rosen staged both productions. For dancers trained in the Soviet system of ballet technique,<sup>143</sup> the Bourneville utilization of intricate footwork in *petit allegro*, fast, small jumps, posed a challenge.<sup>144</sup> The Leningrad company also performed French choreographer Pierre Lacotte's *La Vivandiere* and *Papillon*.<sup>145</sup>

Vinogradov recognized that in order to improve and mature as artists the Kirov dancers needed even more exposure to new and innovative choreography. He also hoped to prove that the Soviet method of training dancers prepared Soviet artists to dance not just the classics, but choreography of any style, even pieces that contained highly complicated and unusual movement outside of the academic ballet vocabulary.<sup>146</sup> Vinogradov proved his

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<sup>142</sup> Vinogradov, *Ispoved' baletmeistera*, 233-34.

<sup>143</sup> Often referred to as Vaganova technique, named after the famous Soviet pedagogue, Agripina Vaganova, who developed the training system in the 1920s and 30s.

<sup>144</sup> Clement Crisp, "Affirming the Classics: The Kirov Ballet in Paris," *Dance Magazine* 56, no. 10 (1982): 70.

<sup>145</sup> Reynolds "Staging Balanchine in Leningrad," 49.

<sup>146</sup> Vinogradov, *Ispoved' baletmeistera*, 290.

commitment to the modernization of the company again when he met and invited another talented French choreographer, Maurice Bejart, to stage his works at the Kirov. Vinogradov proposed Bejart bring three of his works to Leningrad; *Bakhti*, a ballet set to national Indian music, *Opus No. 5*, and the adagio from the ballet *Our Faust*. Vinogradov again encountered difficulties when he requested Bejart's company, Ballet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>147</sup> visit Leningrad to perform. Before an official invitation could be issued, Vinogradov needed to convince the Minister of Culture Petr Demichev of the importance of the company's visit, and enlisted the assistance of Vasiliev and Maksimova to appeal to Demichev. Demichev agreed to the visit of the foreign company, but under the condition that none of the ballets presented include sex or eroticism.<sup>148</sup> Vinogradov promised to comply with the minister's order, knowing full well that all of Bejart's ballets contained elements of these forbidden themes. The Bejart performances in Leningrad were a resounding success, but because of their content, which included supposed "alien ideologies" Vinogradov feared a scandal would erupt.<sup>149</sup> However, no such incident occurred; the two companies continued to benefit from the close relationship of their respective artistic directors.

Although the experiences at the Kirov with both Petit and Bejart proved successful and rewarding for the dancers, it is significant to note that the political views of both these

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<sup>147</sup> While Bejart's troupe, Ballet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, had performed in the Soviet Union in 1978 the company had performed only in Moscow and at the displeasure of Grigorovich. Many attribute that fact that Bejart's company never returned to Moscow again to the influence of Grigorovich.

<sup>148</sup> Demichev insisted that Vinogradov travel to Brussels, where Bejart's company primarily worked, in order to inspect the company's repertoire. Vinogradov, however, could not make the journey and sent his wife, Elena, to comply with the minister's order.

<sup>149</sup> Vinogradov, *Ispoved' baletmeistera*, 238.



Western choreographers were sympathetic to the ideals of socialism.<sup>150</sup> Their political ideologies certainly help explain why these particular choreographers were allowed to work with Soviet dancers when other foreign choreographers could only dream of this opportunity. Yet, despite the political inclinations of Bejart and Petit, their choreography still contained movement outside of the classroom ballet vocabulary that was utilized throughout the majority of the company's repertoire. The two Frenchmen employed steps performed without utilizing turnout and movement in which the dancer's back assumes a concave position.<sup>151</sup> The collaboration therefore provided the Kirov artists an opportunity their comrades at the Bolshoi would not have been able to experience without a fierce struggle against Grigorovich.

While cooperation with foreign choreographers benefited the Kirov dancers, Vinogradov also sought to cultivate the growth of young Soviet choreographers. In 1977 he allowed aspiring choreographer Dimitri Brantsev to stage a program entitled "Choreographic Novel," which featured a series of short pieces set to the music of both modern and classical composers including Tchaikovsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Elton John. Although Brantsev's work does not compare to the genius of Balanchine or Bejart, Vinogradov's willingness to allow choreographers other than himself to contribute to the

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<sup>150</sup> I am grateful to historian Lynn Garafola for bringing the political leanings of these choreographers to my attention. My conversations with Lynn Garafola occurred on October 25, 2012, while she was in Chapel Hill to give a keynote address on dance at an academic conference.

<sup>151</sup> All movement in the academic ballet vocabulary is executed with the heels facing each other and the toes facing outwards, creating a 180-degree plane.

artistic life of the company stands in sharp contrast to how Grigorovich conducted affairs at the Bolshoi Theater.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> In a *New York Times* review of Bryantsev's choreography on the Kirov's American tour in 1989, the critic was not impressed with the performance, which he stated primarily consisted of "bodies rolling around on the floor."

### **Where Is the Innovation?**

“The Bolshoi should have had Balanchine years ago. But they waited for me to take the responsibility,”<sup>153</sup> Vinogradov stated in a 1989 interview with a Moscow television host about incorporating Balanchine ballets into the Kirov repertoire. The Kirov held its première of Balanchine’s *Themes and Variations* and *Scottish Symphony* in late February 1989, but Vinogradov’s desire to bring Balanchine to Leningrad dated back even further. Journalist Nancy Reynolds, who traveled to Leningrad to document this historic première, notes that “Vinogradov has been on record at least since 1982 as favoring an entire evening of Balanchine ballets for the Kirov.”<sup>154</sup> In September 1988, after reaching an agreement with Vinogradov, the Balanchine Trust sent two representatives, former New York City Ballet dancer Suzanne Farrell and former Pacific Northwest Ballet dancer Francina Russell, to teach the Kirov dancers Balanchine’s choreography.

In Leningrad, Farrell and Russell encountered dancers who knew little of Balanchine and struggled to master the demands of the choreography. When questioned about her knowledge of Balanchine, star dancer Altynai Asylmuratova responded, “I have seen very little of Balanchine’s work. He was here once in person, you know, but that was about a hundred years ago.”<sup>155</sup> After several weeks of rehearsal principal dancer Konstantin

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<sup>153</sup> Reynolds, “Setting Balanchine in Leningrad,” 57.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 42.

Zaklinksii stated, “Even now, when I dance the polonaise, my brain knows what I should do, but my legs can’t follow.”<sup>156</sup> Despite these challenges, the performances proved successful, with Reynolds noticing only a few instances of dancers off their marks. The audience also responded enthusiastically with flowers, curtain calls, and cheers.

While the symbolic arrival of Balanchine in Leningrad (symbolic because the master choreographer had died in 1983) constitutes a remarkable feat and an indicator of changing times, this kind of spectacular event was rare during the perestroika period. Other artistic realms saw the proliferation of plays, poems, films, and novels that had been previously created for the “drawer,”<sup>157</sup> but for the art of ballet, a *performing* art, the option of creating for the drawer had not been an option. An article in *Sovetskii balet*, the main ballet periodical in the Soviet Union, lamented the lack of new productions. In 1990 classical heritage ballets composed 50 percent of all performances, with *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* comprising nearly half of the shows.<sup>158</sup> Just as it grew monotonous and unfulfilling for the dancers to perform in the same productions over and over, so it also grew unexciting for the audience to sit through the same shows repeatedly.

The audience was not always guaranteed a high quality performance. Although the advertisement posted outside of the theater might promote a full production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, due to the high frequency of touring the companies did not always have the resources, including both manpower and finances, to present full productions and therefore,

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>157</sup> Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union*, 102.

<sup>158</sup> Ural'skaia, “Trudnoe segodnia nashego baleta,” 19-21.

started performing excerpts from ballets.<sup>159</sup> If the theaters could barely present the staples of their own repertoire how could they be expected to produce new creative works?

The creation of the Association for the Activities of Choreographic Art of the USSR in the late 1980s attempted to address the dearth of new and modern choreography in the Soviet Union. Organized within the framework of the All Union Music Community, the association sought to develop and answer questions regarding what constituted modern choreographic art, preserve and propagandize the classical heritage, and address questions of pedagogy, dance education, and legal issues.<sup>160</sup> *Sovetskii balet* published the organization's charter in its March-April 1990 issue thereby communicating the association's goals to the Soviet ballet community. Despite the stated efforts of the group, little evidence of the organization's influence found reflection at the Bolshoi or the Kirov.

Another *Sovetskii balet* article complained about the lack of exposure to the international dance scene, despite the increased global movement that dancers enjoyed during the Gorbachev era.<sup>161</sup> The editorial by Soviet ballet expert V. Ural'skaia applauded the increase of foreign companies invited to perform on Soviet soil, but criticized the caliber of these companies and the fact that the majority of these performances occurred only in Moscow. The author desired to see the New York City Ballet and Martha Graham's modern dance company invited to perform. Ural'skaia stressed the importance of Soviet dancers and choreographers attending international dance festivals abroad. She asserted that attendance at festivals would not only expose Soviet artists to other forms of choreography, but also assist

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>160</sup> V. Vanslov, "Proekt ustava; assotsiatsii deiatelei khoreograficheskogo iskusstva SSSR Vsesoiuznogo muzykal'nogo obshchestva," *Sovetskii balet* 51, no. 2 (1990): 20.

<sup>161</sup> Ural'skaia, V, "Chto my ne znaem i pochemu ne vidim" *Sovetskii balet* 51, no. 2 (1991): 31-32.

in keeping an interested audience, both at home and on foreign soil. The author attributed Soviet artists' lack of participation in foreign festivals to a lack of financial resources, but expressed hope that associations in the emerging private sector would be able to help.

One such group, the newly formed nonprofit organization called simply the Russian Ballet Fund, held a benefit performance in mid-1991 to raise money for the organization's activities. The performance consisted primarily of Grigorovich's ballets. Founded by admirers of classical ballet and members of the Bolshoi Theater collective, the charity sought to help support ballet artists. Publicized in *Sovetskii balet*, the group asked for contributions from balletomanes that loved the Bolshoi Theater and the traditions of the Soviet ballet school, which they asserted would help in the noble cause of raising the culture of the Soviet people.<sup>162</sup> It is significant that even during economic hardships people valued the traditions of the ballet enough to ensure its survival. Funds raised by the group could have helped rectify some of the criticisms vocalized by ballet critics and experts in *Sovetskii balet*.

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<sup>162</sup> Anna Aldokhina, "Fond 'russkii balet'," *Sovetskii balet* 59, no.4 (1990): 19.

## Conclusion

“I remained in the West because I did not want to die an early death as a ballerina in the Kirov’s routine, which nothing was going to change.”<sup>163</sup> Speaking in the late 1970s, Makarova, had not witnessed nor heard of the innovation occurring at her former home institution before perestroika and glasnost brought significant change to the Soviet system. Certainly, had she remained in the Soviet Union, the artistic opportunities available to her would have been drastically smaller than what she experienced in the West, but that does not mean that the stirrings of artistic ferment were completely absent. By examining the actions of the Bolshoi and the Kirov during the late Soviet period this study has opened a *fortochka* or window into the reevaluation of the trope of Brezhnevite stagnation.

The reforms associated with the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union lifted the seemingly perennial Iron Curtain for Soviet artists performing on the two most prestigious stages in the country. Although both the Bolshoi and the Kirov had embarked on international tours to Western Europe and North America beginning in the late 1950s, and sporadically throughout the following decades, the newfound ability to easily *grand jéte* across borders allowed the troupes to increase their rate of international touring, facilitated the homecoming of previously scorned defectors, and enabled individual dancers the opportunity to guest star with foreign companies without generating scandal and backlash at home. The tours provided

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<sup>163</sup> Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 92.

financial support to the ballet theaters, state sponsored institutions desperately in need of hard currency. In addition to offering monetary benefits to the dancers, guest artist contracts also cultivated long-awaited opportunities for substantial artistic growth.

International mobility allowed some ballet artists to realize fully the artistic potential they had tried to cultivate at home and ensured that highly publicized defection scandals would remain a relic from another era. In Moscow under the dictatorial reign of Grigorovich, artists at the Bolshoi Ballet longed for new works to progress and develop their craft. Many who fought against Grigorovich's rule eventually found creative and artistic fulfillment on foreign stages, but lost their places at the Bolshoi in the process. The Kirov Ballet had begun to experience choreographic modernization beginning in the late 1970s through collaboration with Western choreographers. Even though these choreographic artists were sympathetic to the ideals of socialism, the work they brought to Leningrad represented a stark stylistic departure from the typical ballets of the Kirov repertoire. These choreographic trends illustrate that the cultural lives of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet parallels the ferment occurring among other artistic groups and members of the intelligentsia in the years before Gorbachev.

Yet, despite the desire for innovation and greater creative freedom at the Kirov through artistic leadership, and at the Bolshoi, through the dancers, before the turning point of 1985, during Gorbachev's tenure, the desire for new collaborations and modern creative works exhibited earlier were not completely fulfilled. The repertoire of the nation's leading ballet companies continued to consist of the expected ballets, with noteworthy premiers, such as the Kirov's presentation of Balanchine's *Themes and Variations* and *Scottish Symphony* occurring rarely. Although more than twenty years have transpired since the demise of the



Soviet system, the questions that the Gorbachev era forced the ballet theaters to confront remain unanswered and the problems and tensions inherited by the Bolshoi from Grigorovich remain entrenched in the culture of the theater.

The artistic debates and infighting at the Bolshoi today, which so tragically and violently spilled outside of the theater in the form of an acid attack, illustrates that the conflicts of Grigorovich's tenure are still alive and more public than ever before. The cultural ferment that existed before perestroika has not yielded; it appears to have grown, and continues to exist today. Before the Bolshoi Ballet can begin its next act it must discover a way to reconcile the forces of innovation and tradition.

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